



# Cartooning in a time of calamity

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by Andy Mason

If nothing else can be said in favour of the shocking and turbulent six months that have just gone by, at least they've been good for cartooning. Political cartoonists, by their very nature, thrive on calumny. Catastrophe and ire add lustre to their ink.

But this is not to say that their only role is to wade triumphantly through the muck, hurling barbs at failed leaders. In the brief but heady period of national consensus that followed the 1994 elections, South African cartoonists provided celebratory images – Zapiro's jiving Madiba is perhaps the best example – that gave expression to the mood of optimism pervading the country.

But the Madiba years are over now and in a recent cartoon on the front page of the *Mail&Guardian* (22 May), Zapiro's Madiba and Tutu characters stand, sad and diminished, at the foot of a South African flag drenched in blood. If the cartoons are anything to go by, the euphoric rhetoric of the rainbow nation has given way to a depressing discourse of disillusionment.

Writing in the *Sunday Times* (29 June), Mark Gevisser cautions against thinking about our celebrated transition as a single historical moment. Rather, we should see it as "a perpetual journey", and, he warns, we can expect it to be long, drawn out and messy, characterised by intermittent bouts of blood and thunder.

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Among the so-called leaders of the world are so many buffoons to lampoon that jesters are literally spoiled for choice. And here in our own back yard, Robert Mugabe, as a tragicomic icon of hubristic derangement, has over the last decade attracted more derisory ink than anyone since Idi Amin.

Looking at the recent proliferation of anti-

Mugabe cartoons, it is clear that he has come to symbolise what bourgeois South Africans fear most – the collapse of civilised society. There have been some outrageous Mugabe cartoons lately, but possibly the most savage was a Dov Fedler effort in *The Star* (1 July), which shows Mugabe, his tunic soaked in blood, holding up two severed hands.

Hiding behind Mugabe, a lurking figure is often visible – our disappearing President Thabo Mbeki. But when it comes to our own national crises, Mbeki is nowhere to be seen. In a 26 May cartoon, *Business Day's* Brandon depicts South Africa as a burning Boeing. As the aircraft plunges earthwards, an announcement emanates from the captain's cabin. He's not there right now, but if anyone cares to leave a message...

The cosy bond between Mbeki and Mugabe is also a favourite topic for cartoonists. Zapiro recently showed the two out on a limb, holding hands, with Jacob Zuma sawing away at the branch (15 April).

This cartoon has a special significance for me because I was present at its creation – in the back of a taxi on the way to Oliver Tambo airport in Johannesburg. The vehicle was caught in a huge snaking traffic jam – the robots were all out as a result of load shedding – and Zapiro, who was sitting next to me, was beginning to sweat.

His cartoon for Independent Newspapers was due by 5pm, and it had been his plan to finish it in the airport lounge as we waited for our flight back to Cape Town. We had been at Wits University, participating in a lunchtime discussion on political cartooning with the eminent Canadian journalist Haroon Siddiqui, and the debate had carried on afterwards outside the venue.

Zapiro meanwhile had a cartoon to complete. He had started it on the plane in the morning and planned to finish it in the campus coffee bar, but time ran out and his last hope was to do it at the airport. Now we were stuck in traffic and there was no alternative but to haul out his oversized pencil box and attack the cartoon in the back of the taxi, which he did, punctuating his frantic scribbles with dark imprecations. "I can't go on like this," he grumbled, and indeed he couldn't.





It was the last cartoon he did before resigning, suddenly and dramatically, from his post as the syndicated cartoonist for Independent Newspapers, leaving *The Star*, *Pretoria News*, *The Mercury* and *Cape Times* without a cartoonist.

Fourteen years of committed political cartooning for the country's major papers, producing up to six or seven cartoons a week, had left Zapiro exhausted. Besides, he needed some time to work on his pet project, a collection of his Madiba cartoons to commemorate the great man's 90th birthday.

Zapiro, the quintessential cartooning activist, had been involved in the struggle since the 80s, and was on hand to give graphic expression to the great moment of liberation in 1994. But the optimistic symbols and icons of that miraculous moment are somewhat tarnished now, and his work has become increasingly bleak and pessimistic.

Also galling, as an audience member's question at the Wits lunchtime discussion revealed, was the realisation that he was being wilfully misinterpreted by some members of the public who were using his attacks on the government to bolster their right wing views.

The questioner likened him to David Bullard, who had just been fired from the *Sunday Times*. Zapiro leapt angrily to his own defence. While as a self-confessed "freedom of expression junkie" he supported Bullard's right to write whatever he liked, he said, he took exception to being linked to Bullard.

Recalling the incident later, he blamed what he called an "anomalous confluence" of critical voices, by virtue of which he was effectively grouped with people whose reactionary, anti-democratic viewpoints he deplored.

Zapiro's decision to quit his post at Independent Newspapers sent shockwaves through the local newspaper fraternity. While syndication obviously makes good sense to the bean counters who hover like vultures over newsrooms these days, the syndication of Zapiro in four of the country's leading daily papers and his weekly appearances in the *Mail&Guardian* and *Sunday Times* had the effect of leaving precious

little space for other cartoonists.

But in recent weeks we've seen a welcome shake-up of the local cartooning scene, as other jesters move to fill the spaces opening up. Dov Fedler, one of the true veterans of South African cartooning, is back with a vengeance, and Wilson Mgobhozi, previously an illustrator at *The Star*, has shown a promising aptitude for political cartooning. Another emerging cartoonist who has recently asserted himself is Themba Siwela, whose cartoons previously appeared in *The Mercury*.

Given the nagging racial imbalance in South African cartooning, the arrival of new black cartoonists is good news, bringing a welcome diversity to what was previously (with the exception of a handful of struggle cartoonists like Nanda Soobben and Mogorosi Motshumi) pretty much a whites-only game. Leading the new generation are Brandon Reynolds, who draws for *Business Day*, *The Weekender* and the *Weekend Argus*, and Sifiso Yalo, who draws for the *Sowetan*.

We certainly need a wider range of South African cartooning voices, and newspaper and magazine editors should do what they can to make this happen. In a political situation as contested as ours, one would expect to see more diversity in the portrayal of the nation's leaders. For example, a recent Yalo cartoon in the *Sowetan*, portraying Jacob Zuma as a heroic lion tamer tackling the problem of xenophobia, flies in the face of conventional portrayals of the ANC president, which usually focus on his seamy side.

In the mid-90s the jester's space was cluttered with cartoonists of every persuasion, from rabid right-wingers to committed leftists, with all manner of prevaricating liberals in between.

Not only did progressive cartoonists criticise the state, they also provided positive images and icons that helped South Africans come to terms with the challenges of transition.

If, as Gevisser suggests, we are indeed in a new transitional phase, perhaps it is not too optimistic to hope for a similar blossoming of local cartooning in support of the ongoing struggle to turn South Africa into a country that we all can believe in.

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